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ALERT TOP STORY

Active senior citizens: Carving out a new definition of aging

LAURIE WELCH lwelch@magicvalley.com 20 hrs ago



Jane Hamby runs after the ball while her teammate Lori Wilson watches Sept. 23 in Rupert.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

BURLEY — As more baby boomers turn 65, droves of vibrant, productive Magic Valley senior citizens are redefining what it means to gracefully move into the fourth quarter of life.

Experts say if this large group of senior citizens stays active and healthy, it will positively impact the economy — and increase their quality of life.

Eighty-year-old Jane Hamby's day begins before her feet hit the floor in the morning.

Still lying in bed, Hamby stretches her limbs. The exercise releases the kinks in her muscles from several hours of inactivity and preps her body for an active day.

A bowl of oatmeal with a banana tossed in for sweetness becomes the Burley woman's breakfast.

Three days a week at 7 a.m., Hamby drives about 10 miles from her home to Rupert to play pickleball with partners who span the age spectrum.

“Age has a lot to do with attitude,” she said, her spunky demeanor and appearance contradicting the fact that she's seen eight decades come and go.

Afterward, Hamby hits one of the College of Southern Idaho's "Over 60 and Getting Fit" classes. Following fitness class, she sometimes returns to Burley to play pickleball again — with a different set of competitors.

The active senior also schedules regular times to socialize and she is learning to line dance. Hamby still mows her own lawn and takes several trips a year — some of them overseas.

“I would have never thought of myself as a world traveler,” she said, adding a sweeping gesture with her hands. “But here I am.”

As a senior citizen, she's traveled to Africa, England, Scotland and Wales — and she went to Disneyland without the grandkids.

Unlike society's stereotype of sedentary seniors, Hamby is not spending any of her time sitting in a rocking chair.

Instead, she is one of a growing segment of Magic Valley residents who are redefining life as a senior citizen. As a group, those like her are fearlessly forging the way for the baby boomer generation, a demographic that has slowly begun to retire.

Forging a silent path

Hamby has been on the move her entire life.

“When I was young, wherever we went, we walked,” she said.

She also swam in the river and played softball.

Later, Hamby and her husband had a bustling life raising four girls and two boys. She played volleyball with the children and enjoyed hiking and camping.



Jane Hamby plays pickleball early in the morning Sept. 23, in Rupert.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

But once her children were grown and her working years came to an end, she found herself at a crossroads. Her life's momentum had come to a stop and it was time to make some changes.

Arleen Miles, 81, of Rupert is one of Hamby's pickleball partners.

Both women are from the generation preceding the boomers — sometimes called "the silent generation" — and they are part of a growing number of seniors who are figuring out that life can continue to be enjoyable and rewarding well into the fourth quarter of life.

Their advice is universal: Keep your mind engaged and don't stop moving.

Miles has been afraid of the water her entire life, but 10 years ago, she started practicing water aerobics and she learned to swim. Like Hamby, she also regularly attends the "Over 60 and Getting Fit" exercise classes in Rupert.

Miles has been active her whole life playing church softball and volleyball. For the past 40 years, she has walked in the mornings or evenings with friends. She also used to ski with her husband, James Miles, before he passed away 21 years ago.

All the activity has kept her feeling younger than her years.

“All of my friends are younger than me,” Miles said.



Jane Hamby holds her pickleball racket Sept. 23 in Rupert.
DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

Although she has arthritis and has had surgery on one knee, it doesn't slow her down.

“Exercise may pain you, but it really pays off,” she said.

The biggest reward comes from the social aspects of engaging in physical activity with others.

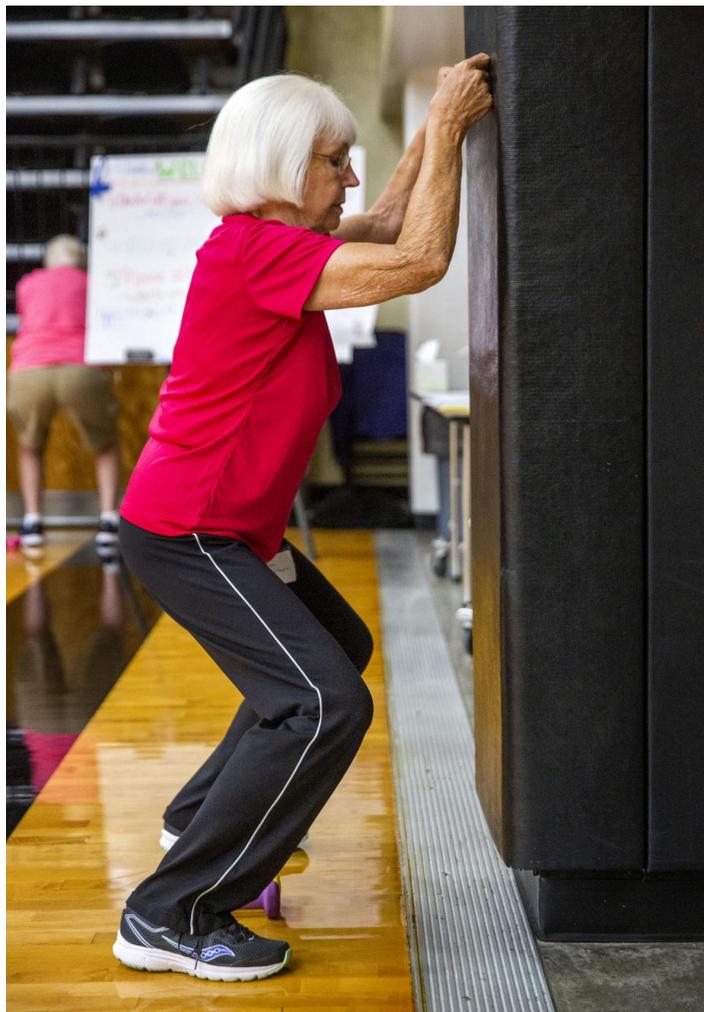
“I don't know what I'd do without my friends,” Miles said.

Miles and her companions keep tabs on each other, which eases her children's minds because they know that other people are watching out for her.

Social connections build new brain pathways

Hamby learned early on that there are five components to her happiness: exercise, eating and sleeping well, socialization and having a hobby to remain engaged in life.

“You have to have a hobby,” Hamby said. “You should play an instrument, do quilting or crochet. You have to have something to keep your mind busy.”



Jean Johnson, 78, works out in the "Over 60 and Getting Fit" class Sept. 18 at the College of Southern Idaho gymnasium in Twin Falls. This is Johnson's third year doing senior fitness classes.

PAT SUTPHIN, TIMES-NEWS



Program Director Shelly Wright teaches the "Over 60 and Getting Fit" class Sept. 18 at the College of Southern Idaho gymnasium in Twin Falls. More than 250 people are enrolled in the class this semester.

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A sticker on a vehicle in Rupert displays the attitude active seniors embody Sept. 23 outside of pickleball practice.
DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

The mind-body connection is more powerful than many people realize, said Shelly Wright, director of CSI's "Over 60 and Getting Fit" program, now in its 35th year.

The "Over 60" students are the college's largest student population, averaging 1,000 pupils per semester.



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Classes are taught at 11 sites across the valley to students aged 60 to 102. A grant and donations subsidize the classes, which are offered free of charge to the seniors.

“We really are seeing an increase in the number of seniors who want to be active,” Wright said.

In part, the growing enrollment may simply be attributed to more people turning 60, but more available education regarding the benefits of staying active could also be playing a role, she said.

“There is an increased amount of information at everyone’s fingertips on what to do to be healthy and to take care of their body,” Wright said.

Along with exercising the body, the classes also fulfill the basic human need for social contact.

“I think the socializing and getting together with people is even more important than the exercising,” Wright said. “It’s number one.”

Exercising and trying new activities forges new connections within the brain, which could help someone, after a stroke, she said.

“When neurons aren’t firing, that plays into aging,” Wright said. “When people retire and sit down, they age faster than those who keep moving.”

When an individual moves their body, they keep their brain active too.

A person is never too old to improve muscle strength, balance and flexibility, she said. When those are developed, the likelihood of injuries or falls decreases, leading to better overall health.



Gary Howe, 71, works out in the "Over 60 and Getting Fit" class on Sept. 18 at the College of Southern Idaho gymnasium in Twin Falls. This is Howe's second year participating in senior fitness classes.

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When challenged, the body — at any age — will adapt, and increased brain function will follow.

The "Over 60" classes are designed to help students work at their fitness level. Individuals can modify the exercise for their bodies.

“We teach them to listen to their bodies, and, if something is painful, to stop,” said Wright. “They take ownership of their bodies and they learn to work in creative ways.”

The danger of doing nothing

One impediment to retirement is that some folks sit down and stop living. Depression soon follows, along with a decline in health, Hamby said.

“They become a couch potato,” Hamby said, crossing her nimble legs atop hard metal bleachers at the Oregon Trail Recreation Center, where she exercises.

“They are all 'go, go, go' and then all of a sudden everything just stops," she said. "They have all this responsibility and then they don't have any, and it's a big, big letdown."

It's not uncommon to see that happen to someone, Hamby said, and, soon afterward, they die or go into a nursing home.

Hamby hit a solid wall of depression six years ago when her husband, Jim, died after 52 years of marriage.

“Lonely is the hardest thing you'll ever do in this life,” Hamby said, pausing as the memory brought a smattering of tears to the corners of her eyes.

When her depression settled in, Hamby instinctively knew that physical activity would help her feel better.

“I knew I had to dig myself out of it,” she said.

She increased her physical activity and started playing more pickleball. Countless benefits soon followed.

The adjustment in activity renewed her life.

The economics of aging

As boomers continue to retire, the trend will impact the economy nationwide, across the state and in the Magic Valley, said Jan Roeser, regional economist for the Idaho Department of Labor.



Jan Roeser

The baby boomers — defined as the generation of people born between 1946 and 1964 — peaked across the country at 79 million in 1999. This year, the boomer population will dwindle to 72 million, according to the Pew Research website, and it is expected to be surpassed by the millennial generation — defined as those born from 1981 to 1996.

Economic growth is inextricably linked to an available workforce in any given area, Roeser said. When a significant portion of the workforce retires, there will be a ripple effect.

Much of the impact on the Magic Valley economy will be determined by how quickly the boomers retire and how high their incomes remain after retirement, along with whether they remain healthy and are able to stay in their homes.

In the eight-county region, 53,152 people are in the workforce and a little more than one-quarter of those — 13,961 — are 55 and over, according to the Idaho Labor Department's third-quarter report for 2018.

The agriculture industry remains the main avenue of employment for boomers across the region.



“Almost one-third of workers age 55 and over are in agriculture,” Roeser said. “It is physical work, but it is also a lifestyle for them.”

It remains to be seen how industry trends will shift across the region as more boomers retire, Roeser said. The Magic Valley is already seeing more automation on farms and dairies, while the number of acres in farm production has increased slightly over the past few years.

Education follows agriculture in the line of industries with the largest number of older workers, followed by retail, health care and social assistance, and, finally, construction.

Economists recognize the impacts of an aging workforce, which include fewer available employees and a loss of productivity, Roeser said. The loss of institutional knowledge is one of the biggest areas where companies will feel the shift.

“The bottom line is when someone with experience leaves a company, they are being replaced by someone who does the job without context,” Roeser said. “But we have to go with the workforce we have.”

Sometimes, customers trust older workers more than younger ones.

“And in some companies, that’s important,” Roeser said.

Generally, the shift means companies are feeling “a little hit on productivity,” she said.

Economists expect other shifts as baby boomers leave the workforce. Increased demand for some services — including health care, nursing homes, in-home care, housekeeping and lawn mowing services — could counter a possible reduced demand for some consumer products as the aging population streamlines household necessities.

As boomers' earnings go down, it could reduce the buying power of the average American consumer, causing the economy to grow more slowly, according to the State Labor Department.

Shouldering an aging demographic

Keeping baby boomers healthy rests on everyone's shoulders because it will likely have a large impact on society as a whole, CSI's Office on Aging Contract Manager Shawna Wasko said.



Shawna Wasko, contract manager for the Office on Aging.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS FILE PHOTO

In the Magic Valley, costs of care at a nursing home or assisted living home run from \$3,000 to \$10,000 a month — a price few families can afford, Wasko said.

Before becoming eligible for Medicaid, often a person has to “spend down” all of their assets. Many elder care homes do not accept Medicaid for payment, leaving families to somehow pick up the tab, she said.

Many adult children become their parents’ caregivers, and they often require support services like respite care or housekeeping to juggle the extra tasks — doubling the burden of care society must shoulder, Wasko said. Adult children may also require more time off work when caring for an aging parent, and absenteeism will affect their employer’s financial bottom line, along with the overall economy.

In order to keep seniors in their homes, caregivers will need extra support and they need to stay healthy, too, she said.



Shawna Wasko talks to caregivers during a Caregiver Support Group meeting Oct. 7 at the Office on Aging on the College of Southern Idaho campus in Twin Falls.

“I get calls every day for caregivers begging for help,” Wasko said. “And if nobody is paying attention, we will have a bunch of broke, burned-out, exhausted caregivers.”

Those families who encourage seniors to take care of themselves, stay engaged in the community and stay physically active have the best chance of succeeding.

The Office on Aging works to connect families with community resources to help make these pivotal years easier, Wasko said, but more funding will be necessary to keep critical programs running in the future as the senior population grows.

Sometimes, just having a hot meal delivered each day through a service like Meals on Wheels is enough to keep seniors living at home, she said.

A word to the wise

Hamby is convinced that a person’s attitude plays a critical role in building a meaningful life as a senior citizen.

Attitude ultimately impacts a person’s health, she said. When a person feels depressed, they are less likely to be proactive with health care or to take simple self-care measures.



The Inside scoop: What did I learn from active seniors?

LAURIE WELCH | lwelch@magicvalley.com

Getting up from the chair or couch and just moving more will lift spirits and benefit the body, Hamby said.

“My goal is to still be playing pickleball when I’m 90,” Hamby said. “You can sit back and say it’s not worth the effort, but just venture out and do it.”

Life-changing rewards, she said, will follow.

Over 60 Class at CSI



Gary Howe, 71, works out in the "Over 60 and Getting Fit" class on Sept. 18 at the College of Southern Idaho gymnasium in Twin Falls. This is Howe's second year participating in senior fitness classes.

PAT SUTPHIN, TIMES-NEWS

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Staying active in your 80's



Jane Hamby plays pickleball early in the morning Sept. 23, in Rupert.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

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Jane Hamby plays pickleball early Monday morning, Sept. 23, 2019, in Rupert.

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Jane Hamby holds her pickleball racket Sept. 23 in Rupert.

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Jane Hamby runs after the ball while her teammate Lori Wilson watches Sept. 23 in Rupert.
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Staying active in your 80's



From right, Lori Wilson and Jane Hamby celebrate a point while playing pickleball early Monday morning, Sept. 23, 2019, in Rupert.

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Idaho demographics

Here's a glance at the Gem State's population breakdown:

- Idaho's estimated population over 65: 281,131
- Idaho's estimated total population: 1,754,208

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

MORE INFORMATION

Idaho Commission on Aging holds local town hall meetings

- Input sought for Statewide Senior Services Plan

Tags

Jane Hamby

Shelly Wright

Jim Hamby

